

John Hiatt

By Peter Stone Brown

If any songwriter can be called a songwriter's songwriter, it's John Hiatt who plays the Variety Playhouse Friday, August 23rd with Native Run opening. His songs have been covered on record and in concert by such songwriters as Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Rosanne Cash, Willie Nelson and Rodney Crowell, and also by such singers as Bonnie Raitt, Emmylou Harris, Linda Ronstadt, Joe Cocker, Aaron Neville and BB King to name a few.

It hasn't always been easy going for Hiatt who released his first album *Hangin' Around the Observatory* on Epic Records in 1974, but didn't achieve true success until more than a decade later.

Hiatt's early life was difficult. His father was in ill health when Hiatt was young and his elder brother committed suicide when John was nine, which was followed by the death of his father two years later. Hiatt took refuge in music with Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Muddy Waters and Jimi Hendrix being early influences. He taught himself guitar at age 11, and not long after started writing songs. Like many people who grew up in the '60s, he was influenced by both British and American musicians, and as is common among musicians and people deeply into music, he followed that music to the source which led him to blues and country music.

Overweight and dealing with a family life best described as tense, he started playing in bands, but also started drinking and experimenting with drugs in his early teens. He dropped out of school, moved to Nashville and found a job as a songwriter for Tree Music, a major Nashville publisher. Hiatt did not read or write music, so he had to record the songs he wrote for Tree in order for them to be heard and leave the musical transcription and notation to others.

In 1973, Hiatt met producer Don Ellis of Epic Records who signed him to a contract. In 1974, his first album, *Hangin' Around the Observatory* was released. Music critics noticed, but no one else did. However, Three Dog Night recorded one of the songs on the album, "Sure As I'm Sittin' Here," and it became a Top 40 hit. *Hangin' Around the Observatory* remains a neglected gem, showing early signs of promise particularly on such songs as "Wild Eyed Gypsies." A year later, he released a second album *Overcoats*, that again received critical acclaim, but underwhelming sales. He was dropped by Epic Records and let go by Tree Publishing. Hiatt left Nashville for San Francisco, where he married and then moved to Los Angeles.

In 1979, he signed with MCA Records, releasing *Slug Line*, an attempt to be new wave. Listening to the album 34 years later, and production seems dated and Hiatt's vocal affectations seem silly, though beneath that, the songs are still there. Hiatt recorded another album for MCA, *Two Bit Monsters*, which received the same reception as his previous three albums, except he was starting to be noticed in Europe, especially in Amsterdam where he performed often, opening for Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes at the Paradiso Club.

Hiatt signed again to Geffen records, but spent much of 1980 and '81 playing rhythm guitar in Ry Cooder's band, and recording the *Borderline* album with him. It was playing with Cooder that I first saw Hiatt. This was during Cooder's R&B period and Hiatt had a guest spot singing OV Wright's classic, "Eight Men And Four Women." It was an unforgettable moment. Around this time Hiatt co-wrote with Cooder and Memphis musician, Jim Dickinson, "Across the Borderline," for the film *The Border*, which was a hit for Freddie Fender. The song is a masterpiece and has been covered by innumerable artists.

Hiatt's first album for Geffen, *All of a Sudden* suffered the same fate as his previous albums, and again had misguided production. However his next two albums, *Riding With the King* and *Warming Up to the Ice Age* found him moving back towards R&B, Soul and Country music. More importantly, his songs were getting noticed by other singers. Rosanne Cash recorded several songs and Bob Dylan recorded "The Usual" for the soundtrack of the ill-fated film *Hearts of Fire*.

Meanwhile Hiatt's life was falling apart. Now a father, his estranged wife committed suicide and Hiatt realizing he was at the bottom with both a heavy alcohol and drug problem checked himself into rehab.

Regaining sobriety, remarried and signed to a new label, A&M, Hiatt recorded his masterpiece, *Bring The Family*, an album that was hard to ignore by anyone who listened to roots based music, and one of the great records of the last 50 years period. Gone was the unnecessary production, the extra instrumentation and any semblance of trying stay current with musical trends. Instead, playing acoustic guitar and piano, Hiatt was backed by a killer small band comprised of guitar master, Ry Cooder. Nice Lowe on bass, and one of the greatest drummers of rock and roll, Jim Keltner. The sound was basic and immediately funky and rocking, but allowed the songs to be in the forefront. Hiatt dropping all new wave and any other affectations sang from deep, deep inside in a way that anyone listening had to be

hit in the heart. And the lyrics which chronicled his life, all the trials and tribulations, his addiction, his recovery, were brilliant and poetic. It was an album where every song mattered, and picking a standout on an album of standouts is difficult, but "Have A Little Faith In Me" is one of the greatest songs done by anyone, "Lipstick Sunset Is Beyond Compare," and Bonnie Raitt had a hit with a fine version of "Thing Called Love." With the right setting, the right backing, the right production and especially the right songs, 13 years after his first album, John Hiatt was finally able to shine. It was an amazing turnaround, comparable to when Jerry Wexler signed Aretha Franklin to Atlantic Records, and instead of putting her in front of orchestras and big bands the way she was at her previous label, Columbia, sat her at the piano and surrounded her with the best R&B musicians in New York and Muscle Shoals.

Hiatt's next album, *Slow Turning*, featuring his band the Goners was almost as good and served to introduce guitar great Sonny Landreth to the world. The album mined similar territory lyrically and featured several standouts, most noticeably, "Feels Like Rain."

In 1991, Hiatt reunited with Cooder, Lowe and Keltner as the group Little Village, recording an album of the same name for Reprise Records. However, even though Hiatt sang the majority of the songs, the songs themselves were a group effort and those hoping for Bring The Family Take Two were disappointed in the album which was released the following year and the subsequent tour. The album kind of had an in-joke feel among the musicians and that did not change in live performance. However, a recent listen to the album turned out to be far more enjoyable than what I remembered, and while the group didn't last beyond the initial tour, it may have been a collective case of expectations superseding and diminishing what actually was happening.

Since that time Hiatt has released several more albums on many different labels, led quite a few different bands and has also performed quite a bit as a solo artist. While he's experimented with various sounds, sometimes harder, sometimes softer, sometime all acoustic, he's never really strayed all that far from what he achieved on *Bring the Family*, and there have been plenty of notable songs along the way such as "Perfectly Good Guitar," "Crossing Muddy Waters," and his truly moving ballad about 911, "When New York Had Her Heart Broke."

In concert, Hiatt is always engaging, never less than moving, at times goofy in an endearing sort of way and most of all real, whether performing with a band or as a solo artist. Exactly a year ago, I saw

him at the Philadelphia Folk Festival with The Combo, the band he's performing with Friday. On a bill that included such top notch artists as Lucinda Williams, Steve Earle and Little Feat, Hiatt easily delivered the most satisfying performance of the night. Those who attend Friday's show should come away equally satisfied.